Indonesia's big hearted spirit in Asean

Indonesia's generosity as a big country has shaped the region. A new book by former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa maps out challenges the grouping faces in the future.

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For The Straits Times

As we, in Singapore, don't appreciate the clear air we breathe until the haze from Sumatra descends upon us, we also don't appreciate the geopolitical calm we enjoy in South-East Asia until the geopolitical haze comes.

This geopolitical haze is coming. Having decided the first six months of my 2013 to study United States-China relations, I have no doubt that US-China rivalry will rise in the coming years. South-East Asia will be directly affected by this rivalry.

So when this happens, and as we search for stabilizers in the storm, we will say: "Thank God, we have Asean." However, we shouldn't just thank God. We should also thank Indonesia. Why? Just look around the world and ask yourselves why many regional organizations, their institutions and leaders from the United States, European Union, Indian, American States, Gulf Cooperation Council and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, are struggling.

One answer is that the largest member of these organizations exercises too much dominance. Indonesia, by far, the largest member of Asean, has 260 million people. Is it not time for Indonesia to dominate Asean?

Quite honestly: No. My co-author, Jeffery Seg, and I, try to provide some answers in our book The Asean Miracle.

Fortunately, the former foreign minister of Indonesia, Dr Marty Natalegawa, has just come out with Asean: Does Asean Matter?, which will be launched at IEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute tomorrow.

One of the blessings of my life has been that as a result of my 33-year diplomatic career, I got to know several Indonesian foreign ministers well, including the legendary earlier foreign ministers Mochtar Kusumaatmadja and Ali Alatas, as well as the more recent ones — Dr Hassan Wirajuda, Mr Marty and Mrs Retno Marsudi.

My direct experience with them enables me to say that Indonesia has shown a generosity of spirit to Asean that no other regional power has displayed toward its region.

I remember telling Mr Lee Kuan Yew a story that Dr Alatas told me that when they began writing this unusual language, they said: "Oops, Singapore is not in Europe." Hence, when these urban planners hosted in the fact that Singapore was a fellow Asian city, they intended to show Jakarta how to do urban planning. This being a very long journey. In 2012, under Cambodia's chairmanship, Asean failed to do so.

This open breakdown in unity could have been catastrophic for Asean. Fortunately, Dr Marty was the Indonesian foreign minister then. He immediately swung into action, undertook shuttle diplomacy to several Asean capitals and within 26 hours, rescued the situation by getting an agreed document on the South China Sea.

He succeeded because he understood well the calculus of diplomacy. As he says in his book: "Some of my most difficult experiences in the practice of diplomacy have involved diplomats endlessly poring over written drafts and dissecting them to pieces. However, in the business of intense diplomacy, as he says, "no written drafts were formally circulated." He added that it took an "almost infinite reservoir of patience" to ensure the strongly opposing views.

As a result of this masterful diplomacy, Asean's Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea were adopted within 36 hours. It is clearly in Singapore's national interest for Indonesia's foreign ministers to carry on with this activist policy of protecting Asean.

Another huge contribution Asean has made to South-East Asia has been to deliver zero wars. Asean is still bringing the European Union because it has not yet delivered on its prospect of war. Indeed, some Asean states have come close to war. This happened between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple in early 2013. Fortunately, once again, Dr Marty was the foreign minister of Indonesia then. He undertook shuttle diplomacy to Phnom Penh and Bangkok on Feb 7 and 8, 2011.

As a result of this shuttle diplomacy, Indonesia was invited to participate in the UN Security Council discussion on this issue on Feb 14, 2013. As Dr Marty notes: "To my knowledge, it is the first time that an Asean member state was asked to appear before the UN Security Council... as chair of Asean." As a result of his intense personal diplomacy, a Special Informal Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Jakarta on Feb 22, 2011, managed to dissolve the situation.

For the rest of that year, Dr Marty and Indonesia remained actively engaged. War was avoided.

As a result of his extensive direct experiences with Asean diplomacy, Dr Marty is able to dispense much-needed wisdom.

He emphasized that his book is focused not on the past 50 years of Asean's achievements, even though he describes the first book that contributed to Asean's exceptional success. For example, he says: "The leadership of Indonesia and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore were instrumental in promoting a new type of relations where their countries' bilateral relations and thus, indirectly, the region.

His main goal with this book is to help Asean deal with the next 50 years of challenges. He stresses the imperative of developing "strategic trust" and advises that the "consolidation of strategic trust for the next fifty years, therefore, requires a judicious combination of a "rules-based" Asean and one that continues to place stock on the importance of that often-cited "Asean spirit".

In this book, he also pays tribute to the two Singapore foreign ministers he worked with, Mr George Yeo and Mr K. Shanmugam. He praises Mr Shanmugam for delaying his departure from the Asean meeting in 2013, just in the last ditch effort to save the meeting. He also describes the bilateral relationship between Singapore and Malaysia.

Mr Shanmugam and Malaysia's Deputy Sei Anshar Abdullah deal with the haze issue in June 2013. On the haze issue, he adds, wisely: "I deemed it essential that Indonesia took the leadership and ownership of the cooperative process — instead of positioning the issue of the haze as being solely affecting its own national interest."

It is a reality that Singaporeans don't read books on Asean. The book on Asean that I co-authored with Singapore, and while my sixth book, I expect it to be the best-selling one in Singapore since Singapore is so critical to Singapore. Instead, it has turned out to be the least-read book of mine in Singapore.

Hopefully, I believe that Singaporeans will not ignore this book. I believe that the book contains many gems of wisdom. Let me conclude with a piece of that wisdom from his book: "In the world of the 21st century, the idea of a single country 'winning' through the singular and narrow pursuit of its interests — oblivious to the wider context — cannot possibly be sustained."